Folk horror, ostension and Robin Redbreast

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'Folk horror' is a relatively newly-defined genre of film and television, most often used to describe narratives featuring folkloric elements such as paganism, witchcraft, stone circles and ghosts. Such narratives are often presented on screen within pastoral settings and remote communities such as in film and television offerings including *A Field in England* (2013) and *The Living and the Dead* (2016). A progressively broad revival of interest in texts like these, centred on folklore and contemporary legend, is gaining increasing attention from both cult and academic audiences and film and programme creators alike, and has gained 'folk horror' clear status as a sub-genre. However, acknowledging *folklore* as central to folk horror, how it is perpetuated through mass media and how it is particularly culturally affective is something that folklorists and screen studies scholars are only recently beginning to explore.

The phrase 'folk horror' itself was first used in 2003 by director Piers Haggard to describe his film *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), now canonised as one of the 'unholy triumvirate' of folk-horror films alongside *Witchfinder General* (1968) and *The Wicker Man* (1973). Robert Wynne Simmons, writer of *Blood on Satan's Claw* describes this perpetual fascination with folklore: 'The folk tale will never die, and horror is an element of the folk tale' (pers. comm. 2017) and Jeremy Dyson, who frequently uses folkloric narratives in his work from *The League of Gentleman* (1999-2017) to *Ghost Stories* (2017), echoes that folk tales 'have universal appeal, there's a big crossover with religion and people *can't not watch*' (pers. comm. 2018).

Admirers of the genre are consistently drawn back to British folk horror film and television of the 1970s when television narratives involving folklore accounted for many hundreds of hours of programming, including documentaries such as the BBC's *The Power of the Witch* (1970), children's programmes such as *Children of the Stones* (1977) and darker intellectual drama aimed at adults such as *Robin Redbreast* (1970), which I will examine later in this paper.

Ben Wheatley, along with a growing number of British writers and directors, cites 1970s television as tremendously influential upon his current work. Wheatley states 'Seventies shows...[were] really impactful in a way that drama doesn't seem to be any more. You felt your mind being scarred and you were never the same again afterwards' (in Bonner 2013). This visceral reaction resonates with other writer-directors, like Ashley Pharaoh (*Life on Mars* 2006-7**,** *The Living and the Dead* 2016) who cites many of the same 1970s influences, noting that 'the BBC Christmas stories' particularly left strong impressions upon him (Mellor 2016). The *Inside Number 9* series has made a number of folk-horror offerings including 'The Devil of Christmas' (2016) which is set in 1977, is about the making of a television drama in that period, is based upon

a folk legend, and even employs 'vintage tube-based studio broadcast cameras and period lamps to give the studio an authentic 70s atmosphere' (BBCStudioworks 2016).

Modern folklore theory argues that contemporary and non-oral forms of folklore are worthy of serious academic consideration; Alan Dundes helped expand the definition of 'folk' and folklore, beyond traditional rural storytelling, to include 'the cultural texts of groups of all socio-economic backgrounds' (Gürel 2005: 4). If we are all folk and if folklore is, in part, 'man's attempt to bring enjoyment to his leisure through the art of storytelling' (Thompson 1977: vii), then those who create television are of course worthy of study in this respect. Recent interviews with directors like Piers Haggard and Lawrence Gordon Clark show that they indeed consider themselves storytellers, first and foremost: Haggard states that 'film is like telling a story, it certainly is in our culture, it's about telling a story... the most important thing is the *story*' (pers. comm. 5 June 2017).

Folklore scholars Linda Dégh and Andrew Vásonyi's original appropriation of the notion of ostension in their seminal article 'Does the Word "*Dog*" *Bite*? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend Telling' (1983) cannot be underestimated as a significant point in modern folklore studies. The word 'ostension' itself derives from the Latin 'ostendere', to show, and was used by semiotician Umberto Eco to refer to non-verbal communication when people substitute actions for words, such as raising a finger to the lips indicating a need for quiet.

Dégh and Vásonyi's notion of ostensive action describes behaviour based on, or influenced by, folklore and legend (legendary tales being those which, whilst they might not literally be true, have the *possibility* of truth) and which, in turn can create or perpetuate folklore: ostensive action or behaviour is that which occurs based on a tale. The tale, presented in action, thus becomes reality, and action and belief affect and perpetuate one another: "not only can facts be turned into narratives but narratives can also be turned into facts" (1983: 12). Ostension is, therefore, a term used by folklorists to suggest a perpetuation of belief and ostensive action is to behave in a certain way or alter ones actions as a consequence of belief in folk myth or legend. An example Bill Ellis gives is not allowing your child to trick or treat in case they receive an apple filled with razor blades: this is ostensive action - whether the apple exists or not is less significant here than the *acting on belief* (1989). In our own response to folkloric tales on television or in film, we may have pulled the duvet tight or slept with the lights on because of stories of witchcraft or ghosts and, in such cases, we too are acting on some level of belief, carrying out ostensive action.

Amongst the first scholars to further develop the concept of ostension alongside the explicit examination of popular film and television as a form of folklore were Sharon Sherman and Mikel Koven. Still an exploratory area for the discipline, Sherman states 'Looking at film as a way of conducting folkloristic research is a new conception, one which folklorists can use for a reflexive stance about their own practices.' (2005: 158). Juwen Zhang, drawing upon the work of

Sherman and Koven, uses the term 'filmic folklore' (2005) to describe films illustrating 'a folklore that either does not exist in real life or is entirely taken out of context. But audiences see the representation as real. Thus, the filmic presentation of a non-existent folklore creates a totally new form of folklore.' (Sherman 2005: 158).

Sherman asks, in an attempt to urge modern folkloristics toward a more serious consideration of popular culture: 'Does popular cinema become folklore? If so, how? And how might popular cinema create, reflect, and refract folkloristics?' (2005: 161). Additionally, much of the study of film and folklore to date, where it does exist, largely focuses on American media; understandable as folkloristics is taken more seriously as a discipline in the US than in the United Kingdom at present. Folkloristic study of British television drama in this respect is breaking new ground, and Koven's work best presents a conceptual framework for a development of this to date. Koven suggests that the narrative dramatisation of a legend, or the presentation of folklore within onscreen action, is a kind of ostension in itself. This type of 'cinematic ostension':

> implicitly recognises an audience by encouraging some form of post-presentation debate regarding the veracity of the legends presented... Whether ...believed or not, such veracity is secondary to the discussion of their *possibility*; which I would argue is an essential aspect of the legend in general. (Koven 2007: 185)

There are several permutations of ostension, but the one I am drawing from as a framework within which to study film, television and folklore, is Koven's notion of 'mass-mediated ostension' (2008). Koven recognised that 'mass-mediated ostension' might be a more useful term to employ than 'cinematic ostension', as this can be extended beyond film to include television and the convergence of folklore and popular media in general: to use 'an ostensive methodology, [in] looking at how a television series ...can be considered a form of ostension...' (2007: 183). Koven notes that 'Dégh and Vázsonyi would not have considered film or television use of legend materials as ostensive', but rather a pseudo-imitation, as they argue that audiences are aware that they are not witnessing a presentation of literal reality, but a story represented as a possible or plausible version of reality. However, Koven uses the phrase 'mass-mediated ostension' to directly address this issue, describing the *showing* or *acting-out* of folkloric narratives in the mass media whilst recognising the importance of film and television to the folkloric process.

Any media text, even a more straightforward dramatised ghost story, for example, in its presentation of folklore or contemporary legend, is recognised as mass-mediated ostension. The text is the medium which presents and encourages debate, whether within or beyond a television

show itself, ostension has occurred; explicit debate within the text itself is not essential; simply the presentation of the legend raises 'the *possibility* that the phenomenon was real, even if entertained momentarily, makes the incident legendary. And that this phenomenon is *presented* for us, makes the event ostensive.' (Koven 2007: 194).

How legend is reproduced onscreen, using what techniques, is therefore central in the examination of mass-mediated ostension in both the presentation of narratives and in making them plausible for an audience. Adam Scovell argues that folk horror 'is never all that fussed with a genuine, accurate recreation of folklore' and that 'anything could effectively be put into the mix of practices and customs, and still come out looking relatively authentic' (Scovell 2017: 29) but this claim to a degree of authenticity is precisely why examination of such folkloric presentation is important. As Dégh and Ellis have made clear, what and why beliefs persist, develop, are acted upon or reproduced in culture is absolutely integral to modern folkloristics, as is the concept of ostension itself. A useful example Jacqueline Simpson gives is the fabricated legend of the three crowns of East Anglia, as used by M. R. James in *A Warning to the Curious* (adapted for television in 1972). The tale is given such 'plausible details, many readers now assume that this antiquarian 'legend' which James wove into his fictional tale is authentic folklore.' (Simpson 2011: 286).

So, in the onscreen presentation of a legend or folkloric narrative, ostension has occurred: 'if a particular tele-play presents the narrative to us (the audience) as dramatic recreation, it is ostensive... Ostension occurs when we are sutured into the diegesis (and the mechanisms for that suturing) and we experience it directly, as opposed to being told the story. Ostension is action.' (Koven pers. comm. 2018). For example, in television episodes of *A Ghost Story for Christmas*, we see characters being 'haunted' (e.g. *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas* and *A Warning to the Curious*), and in *The Owl Service* we see uncanny events occur and characters become strangely affected by Welsh legend, thus the programmes are ostensive.

Gillian Bennett acknowledges that popular media can directly influence the shaping of public conceptions about folklore and the supernatural (Bennett 1987: 44), while Deborah Macey, Kathleen Ryan and Noah Springer also note that television's varied 'narratives, and cultural forms are not simply entertainment, but powerful socializing agents' (Macey, Ryan & Springer 2014: 6). Therefore, it is of vital importance to clarify and contextualize history and folklore as presented by popular film and television texts *because* of their ability to affect and perpetuate contemporary folkloric belief. Acknowledging the derivation of folklore employed in television is, therefore, an integral furrow to plough in explaining the enduring influence and often-acclaimed eeriness of that which is wyrd. What Koven (disparagingly) refers to as 'motif-spotting' is therefore a less useful approach than one based on a more general examination of

how (and which) folk beliefs are represented: ‘To understand *how* popular film and television uses folklore motifs, we must dig deeper to see what happens when such motifs are recontextualised within the popular media text’ (Koven 2008: 70).

Robin Redbreast

I therefore intend here to draw out folkloric elements used in *Robin Redbreast*, and examine *how* these are presented on screen, and in what context. *Robin Redbreast* was first broadcast on the 10th December 1970 as a BBC 1 *Play for Today*, just preceding the first episode of the BBC's *Ghost Story for Christmas* in 1971 (1968's *Whistle And I'll Come to You* often associated with the series was, in fact, part of the *Omnibus* series and broadcast in May). *Robin Redbreast* was, therefore, part of a long running tradition of scary Christmas stories, long embedded into British culture alongside the tales of Charles Dickens and M.R. James. Unsettling Christmas fare on television had become such a staple of broadcast schedules by the 1970s that Mark Gatiss states such programming was 'as necessary to the festive season as mince pies' (in Earnshaw 2014: 5).

Whereas the BBC’s *A Ghost Story for Christmas* series relied on the more traditional period piece tales by Dickens or James, *Robin Redbreast*, written by John Bowen, was closer to the pioneering contemporary setting of *The Wicker Man* (1973). Bowen's teleplay follows the character of Norah Palmer, a television script editor who, following the break-up of a long-term relationship, escapes to a rural farmhouse complete with a creaky wooden staircase and cavernous hearth. But this is no cozy retreat as, Norah discovers, the local villagers have strict local traditions, are highly manipulative and are disapproving of Norah's modern independence and cosmopolitan ways.

Norah is introduced to young gamekeeper Rob (or Robin, not his real name but a nickname bestowed upon him by the villagers) to whom she is attracted even though he is an odd character, and there are suggestions that he is something of an outsider to the other villagers. After an evening of awkward flirtation between Rob and Norah, interrupted by unromantic events like a bird falling rather violently down the chimney, the situation is manipulated to allow the unlikely pair to end up in bed together, after which Norah soon finds she is pregnant.

A series of other mysterious occurrences add a sense of creeping threat to the play, all of which are tangible events not horrific in themselves but which together create a creepy atmosphere, manifesting on the soundtrack as mice scratching in Norah's cottage wall and voices and cries are heard on the wind. The *BBC Radio Times* noted that *Robin Redbreast* is suffused 'with such elements as dead chickens, all-knowing village sages, murderous axes, birds in the chimney and fertility symbols' (1971: 5), all weighty with ominous ritual suggestion.

The aforementioned 'all-knowing village sage' refers to the character of Mr. Fisher, a fount of local knowledge who appears in Norah's garden with a peculiar request to 'hunt for sherds' (from the old English 'potsherd', which refers to fragments of prehistoric pottery). Described as a 'learned fellow' with 'the instinct', Fisher is a self-confessed 'student of...old things', knows the 'Old Tongue' (Anglo-Saxon) and his pursuit of 'sherds' suggests he is, as Vic Pratt describes 'like a fragment of an elusive rural English past' (2013: 1). The introduction of Fisher within these terms reveals that not only does he has some special knowledge of local history and folklore, but the fact that Norah's housekeeper Mrs. Vigo speaks of Fisher in reverential tones ('He'm got the instinct. *Known* for it') suggests an influential position in the community and that power is afforded him because of this.

Folklorists and characters with knowledge of folklore are regularly portrayed as outsiders in both film and television (such as Helen in *Candyman* 1992 and the Winchester brothers in *Supernatural* 2005-present). These characters are often depicted collecting folklore or studying strange local customs in rural areas which leads to them facing terrible fates as a result: 'studying folklore puts the folklorists dangerously close to a realm of paranormal evil, and in most cases they do not survive their encounters with that realm' (Tolbert 2016: 141). However, Fisher in *Robin Redbreast* is to be feared and Norah is the outsider here, in danger due to her *lack* of knowledge about local folk beliefs. Early in the play, Norah finds herself following Fisher's directions into the woods as a mysterious solution to her problem with vermin in the cottage: 'back by the game-keeper's cottage: that's where I should go, if I was troubled with vermin'. We later realise this is a significant link in a chain of events manipulated by Fisher and, instead of putting Fisher in harm's way, his knowledge of folklore allows him to orchestrate ritual activity that is dangerous to others. Jeffrey Tolbert states: 'Folklore is potentially dangerous knowledge... and folklorists are therefore dangerous people' (2016: 139) but, rather than bringing Fisher into a dangerous sphere, his knowledge here allows him to create and perpetuate this danger for outsiders to the village with no real threat to himself.

There are points in *Robin Redbreast* at which characters explicitly discuss folklore or belief, known folkloric texts and, within the diegesis, local history and folkloric traditions. Koven refers to this kind of discussion of folklore; 'telling' as opposed to showing action, as 'representation of the belief nexus rather than a product of it' (Koven pers. comm. 2018). 'Telling' (representation) is less ostensive than 'showing' (presenting or dramatised) but both function as types of ostension within *Robin Redbreast* and, I propose, each complements the other. Bowen's teleplay quotes Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, a text which was also drawn from for the ideas behind *The Wicker Man,* a central notion of which was a sacred king: a human sacrifice offered back to the earth to rejuvenate the land and make way for a new king. In

Film, Folklore and Urban Legends (2008), Koven notes that *The Wicker Man* director Robin Hardy and screenwriter Anthony Shaffer 'made absolutely explicit the source materials that inspired the film' primarily *The Golden Bough*; and that Hardy and Shaffer 'demonstrate their unquestioning acceptance of *The Golden Bough*'s truths' (Koven, 2008, p. 26-28). In *Robin Redbreast*, Fisher states: 'the goddess of fertility in the old religions...would couple with the young king... and from his blood the crops would spring...You must read a book by Sir James Frazer - *The Golden Bough* in seven volumes.' A horrified Norah realises Robin is the sacrificial virgin, needed only to sow his seed and be ritually murdered as per local tradition to bring fertility to the land. Sinister housekeeper Mrs. Vigo explains the ongoing traditional belief: 'there's always one young man answers to 'Robin' in these parts—has to be'. The villagers' belief in ancient pagan rites to sustain fertility of the land and Fisher's coolly dispassionate discussion of sacrifice, reinforced by what he sees as a factual text, makes their actions seem like simple everyday matter-of fact, and more unsettling to the audience because of this. Though Frazer's text is considered problematic and misguided by contemporary folklorists, now widely discredited, its use is interesting here. The combination of 'showing' events (rituals acted out onscreen leading up to the sacrifice of Robin which itself happens off-screen, although we hear a blood-curdling scream) and 'telling' (in the discussion of folklore and a real-world text) may accentuate the verisimilitude for the audience and, therefore, the overall ostensive effect.

The eponymous 'Robin Redbreast' is, of course, significant in folkloric terms. Robins were famously appropriated in the Victorian era as cheery messengers on Christmas cards (when postmen were nicknamed 'redbreast' or 'robin' due to their red tunics). However, legends associated with the robin have darker origins: many British folk beliefs cast them as bad omens or messengers of death. For example, there is a long-held belief in British folklore that it is extremely unlucky to take a Robin's eggs or damage a nest, an interesting parallel to the villagers' careful concern for Rob and Norah's unborn child. It was also believed that an ill fate would find anyone who killed a robin. One writer explains that 'if a robin dies in your hand, it [the hand] will always shake', whilst another English folk rhyme suggests 'The blood on the breast of a robin that's caught; Brings death to the snarer by whom it is caught' (Federer 1868).

Robins also have a history of religious reverence, which comes from the way it is said to have received its red breast. One Welsh folk tale tells that the robin scorched its breast in the fire of purgatory, when it took pity on sinners and carried water in its beak to tormented souls. Some legends tell that the robin was stained with the blood of Christ as the bird tried to pluck away his crown of thorns. In all the tales, the bird is closely linked with death and blood, and the *Robin Redbreast* title is used here by Bowen for ominous associations.

Elsewhere, *Robin Redbreast* echoes conflicts of Christian faith and folk belief. One scene shows a montage lingering on visceral images of slaughtered rabbits and game birds, blood dripping from whiskers and feathers, which suggest sacrificial offerings rather than a Christian harvest festival sermon. The vicar's accompanying dialogue speaks in surprisingly pagan terms of 'our precious seed...to bring it forth one more in the spring, when the green shoots pierce the earth'. However, as soon as the dialogue shifts from discussion of the land 'And now to God the Father', the vicar's words are quickly faded from the soundtrack. The presentation of belief here within the diegesis moves emphasis sharply away from Christianity to the importance of pagan ritual to the community. It is important to the villagers to attend harvest festival: Mrs. Vigo unquestioningly informs Norah that 'I come to take you to church', but that the attendance of the Vicar himself is not vital and other significant dates on the Christian calendar such as Christmas are largely irrelevant as 'we don't take much account of that'.

In the most overt confirmation of Pagan influence in *Robin Redbreast*, in a chilling point of view shot as Norah leaves the village, she sees the villagers changed: Fisher sports antlers and ancient garb and Mrs. Vigo's hair streams from a black hooded robe. Bowen's teleplay notes that here Fisher is Herne the Hunter, a pagan spirit or God associated with woods and oak trees, while housekeeper Mrs. Vigo is described as the Crone, Hecate, a pagan goddess often described as 'Queen of the Witches' (Muller 1973: 240). Whether the villagers are revealed as their true selves, or this is Norah's perception of them, Bowen explicitly employs folk belief here, believing that legend is entirely relevant to contemporary audiences, as 'applicable to modern life as well as to the time when the myth first appeared' (Bowen 2013). The history, faith and legend here lend a haunting background to the story for the audience here, with a sense of the past lying just behind the present.

Robin Redbreast was in fact based to a degree in historical fact, most grimly on the real-life still-unsolved killing of Charles Walton, a man who could 'reputedly charm animals with his voice and knew many old rural ways' who was found dead on Valentines' Day, 1945 (Fowler 2013: 5). The description of Walton is reminiscent of the introduction of Fisher in *Robin Redbreast,* as having 'the instinct', but the manner in which Walton was killed has also been linked to ideas of sacrifice and witchcraft. Walton’s brutally beaten body was discovered in what Paul Newman deliciously describes as the 'depths of the smiling countryside' (2009: 14). This sinister and notorious case features so many peculiar folkloric aspects and coincidences that Newman notes it 'make[s] one think this is surely the plot of an imaginative novelist': the prongs of a 'pitchfork pierced the flesh on either side of the victim's neck [and] the billhook with which the throat had been cut was stuck deep in the chest' (Newman 2009:14).

The Walton murder case, in Lower Quinton, Warwickshire, was investigated by Chief Inspector Robert Fabian, himself a household name. Fabian rose quickly through the ranks of the Metropolitan police, capitalizing on the notoriety of his work in his crime writing, which was dramatized by the BBC in the popular TV series *Fabian of the Yard* (1954-56). Fabian's investigation uncovered rites and rituals taken as routinely accepted belief in small communities such as Lower Quinton. Fabian learned of ancient Anglo-Saxon customs of either slashing a cross into a murdered witch's skin, or sticking spikes into them; known as 'stacung' or 'stanging' (a 'stang' being a two-pointed stick which some witches reputedly identified with the horned God). One review of *Robin Redbreast* quotes Fabian, who warned 'anybody who is tempted at any time to venture into Black Magic, witchcraft, Shamanism [should] remember Charles Walton [whose death was] clearly the ghastly climax of a pagan rite.' (Collins 2013).

Fabian, though likely exaggerating occult aspects of the case to exploit potential publicity for his work (writing his book *Anatomy of Crime* twenty five years after the Walton case, in 1970) was, as a respected authority figure, also writing with sincerity. Throughout British media in the 1960s and '70s, reality and fiction blurred in an era where folk belief was considered seriously. In this 'cultural moment when witchcraft and the occult were no longer ludicrous' (Pratt 2013:2), the time was ripe for discussion of folklore in the media, and such communication of folklore allows for its perpetuation: ostension and extended *potential* belief. The presentation of events and folk belief in *Robin Redbreast* struck a chord with audiences and reviewers, *Radio Times* reviewers describing the play as 'beautifully creepy' and 'convincingly terrifying' (1971: 5). *Robin Redbreast* highlights contemporaneous news stories, as Norah grimly observes: 'Every now and again there's a song and dance about it in the Sunday papers. Devil worship. Graves dug up... stories of blood...'. The convincing presentation of legend and folk belief in this context perhaps more easily suggested "the *possibility* that the phenomenon was real, even if entertained momentarily" (Koven, 2007, p. 194) for audiences who did indeed wonder about *Robin Redbreast* to the BBC if this kind of thing could really happen and that 'after living in a small village in the South-West we can well believe this play' (BBC WAC R9/7/109). Therefore, the fact that *Robin Redbreast* presents an unsettling view of pagan ritual and belief within this context of news, folkloric texts and legends as employed by John Bowen in his teleplay, suggests that the plausibility of such narratives means that the mass-mediated ostensive effect of television is thus able to assist in perpetuating folklore and *potential* belief as part of the folkloric process.

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